

Last word on JFK assassin

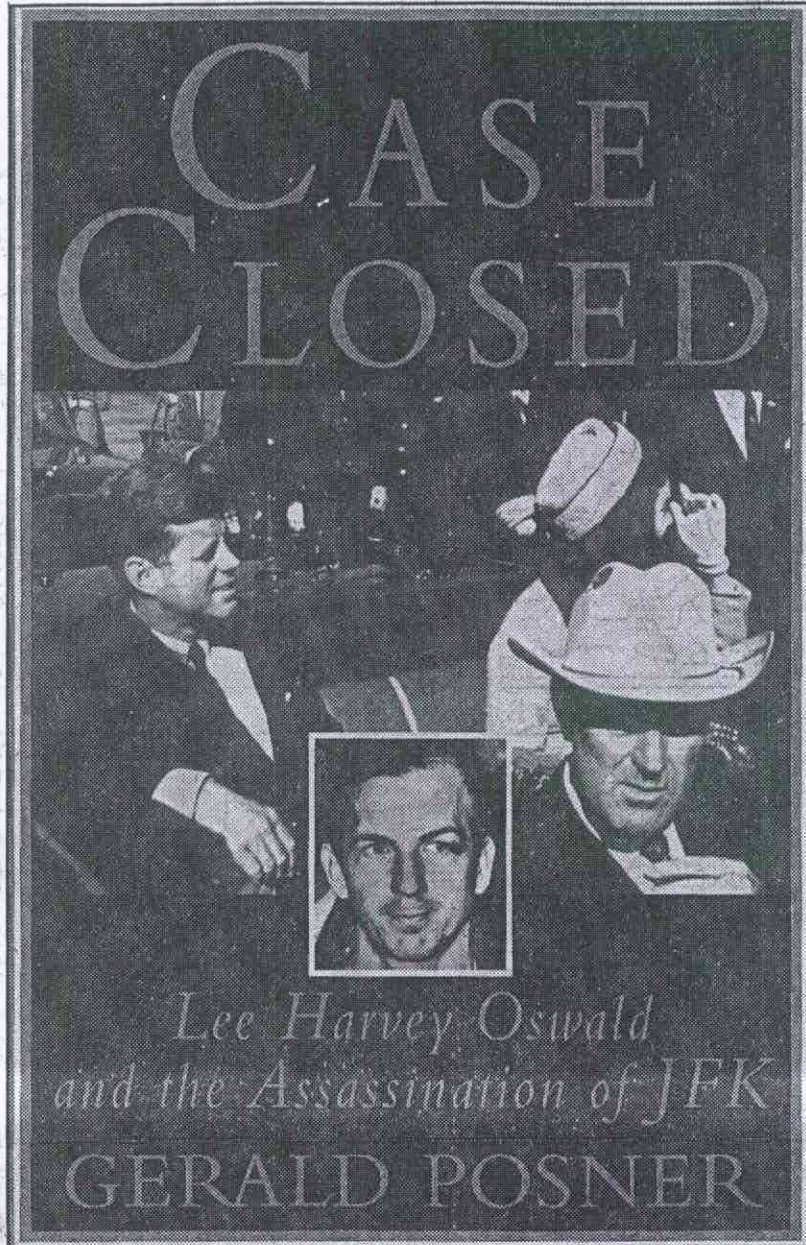
"Case Closed." Gerald Posner.
Random House. \$25. 608 pages.

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LEE HARVEY Oswald killed John F. Kennedy. No accomplices were involved — no Russian spies, no mobsters, no Cuban hit men. The Warren Commission made mistakes, but its basic thesis — that Oswald acted alone — remains sound, almost 30 years after the assassination in Dallas.

That is Gerald Posner's thesis, and he makes it persuasively, so persuasively that his book's title is absolutely justified. A former Wall Street lawyer, Posner strengthens his gripping account (I stayed up all night reading it) with new computer enhancements of the Zapruder film, information from the post-Soviet KGB, and helpful full-page diagrams. He also uncovers key errors — some of them real whoppers — in books by conspiracy buffs. "Chasing shadows on the grassy knoll," he warns, "will never substitute for real history."

Of course, his book is unlikely to sway "conspiratologists." They're too busy looking for smoking guns in the recently released CIA files on the assassination, and they'll probably dismiss Posner as another agent of the conspiracy. ("Wall Street lawyer, eh? Hmmm...") I heard one on the radio the other day, raving about numerous eyewitnesses who were mysteriously "killed" after the assassination. Obviously he hadn't read Appendix B of Posner's book, which lists every one of the alleged 100-plus dead eyewitnesses, their cause of death and their relationship to the assassination. Most died years or de-



Gerald Posner persuasively posits that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone.

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ades after the assassination, all from natural causes. And many of them weren't even eyewitnesses. Sadly, the tale of the "murdered" eyewitnesses will probably live forever in folklore, like the fabled (and equally fictional) "curse" that slew all who entered Tutankhamen's tomb.

In fact, the Kennedy assassination generated a slew of seemingly unkillable "urban legends," which endure long after they were disproven. Consider those "faked" photos of Oswald holding the fatal rifle (they weren't faked, and Posner explains why); those claims that Jack Ruby had "close ties" to mobsters who hired him to snuff Oswald (he had no such ties, and the mob wouldn't have entrusted such a delicate mission to a notorious "snitch" like Ruby); and those allegations that "someone" (the CIA? FBI? NSA?) placed the bullet on Gov. John Connally's hospital stretcher to enhance the Warren Commission's single-bullet theory.

About that bullet: It's the key to Oswald's guilt, yet it is routinely scorned in popular accounts. Back

in 1964, the Warren Commission concluded Oswald had fired three shots, the first of which — the single bullet — passed through JFK and hit Connally as they rode by the Texas Book Depository. A subsequent shot blew Kennedy's skull off. Critics insist that Oswald wasn't a good enough marksman; that he didn't have time to fire three shots; that the single bullet had to follow an impossibly zig-zag path to cause both Kennedy's initial injury and Connally's lesions; and that the purported single bullet (the one on the stretcher) was too "pristine" to have wrought such mayhem. Also, they argue that Kennedy's physical reactions indicate he was hit by a bullet coming from a different direction, away from Oswald's perch atop the book depository. Hence, there must have been at least one other gunman.

The first accusation is easily

disposed. Oswald had served in the Marines, who considered him "an excellent shot." With an M-1 rifle, he could hit a target 200 yards away without using a telescopic sight. As seen through the 4X sight on Oswald's Mannlicher-Carcano rifle, President Kennedy appeared to be just *one-eighth* that distance. "A simple shot," Posner calls it.

The timing argument relies heavily on Abraham Zapruder's 8mm home movie of the assassination. In frame 225, as the car emerges from behind a road sign, Kennedy's right hand is rising as if he's reacting to the first bullet. A long delay follows before Connally reacts to being hit — too long for a single bullet to explain both men's reactions, critics charge. Because Oswald couldn't have reloaded fast

enough to explain Connally's reaction, there must have been a second gunman. This theory was temporarily enhanced when the House Assassinations Committee concluded there was a second gunman, based on tape-recorded acoustical evidence that later fell apart (it turned out the tape recording had been made a minute *after* the assassination).

Posner presents a radically different scenario, aided by Failure Analysis Associates' 1992 computer enhancement of the Zapruder film. The film reveals that Oswald's first shot occurred much earlier — around frame 160 — than previously thought, and was deflected by a tree. Kennedy's right-hand motion wasn't a reaction to a bullet at all; he was just waving to the crowd. Not until frames 226-27 did his arms suddenly jerk upward — an involuntary reflex called the "Thorburn's Position" — as the bullet struck his spine at 1,800 feet per second.

Almost simultaneously, the computer enhancement shows, Connally's suit lapel flips upward. This happened "at the exact area where the Governor's suit and shirt (later displayed) a bullet hole," Posner writes. Then Connally's Stetson hat, which he held in his

hand, jerked as the bullet hit his wrist. Finally the bullet slammed into his thigh at 400 feet per second, bruising it. A three-dimensional computer reconstruction of the bullet's path shows it traveled in almost a straight line through both men's bodies. There was nothing "magic" about it. Later, neutron-activation analysis of bullet fragments in the car and on Connally's stretcher showed they came from two bullets, the kind used in Oswald's rifle. There was no need for a second gunman.

The third, fatal shot came in frame 313. Popular folklore holds that Kennedy "must" have been shot from the front because this frame shows him jerking backward. Actually, the president's backward motion is exactly what physicists and neurophysiologists would expect. For one thing, the bullet caused a neuromuscular spasm that stiffened the body, causing it to lurch upward and backward. Remember the horrific videotape from Nicaragua, back in the early 1980s, when one of Somoza's thugs shot a TV reporter lying on the ground? The reporter's body briefly arched off the ground — *toward* the gun.

Posner complains that as the years pass, and as conspiracy writ-

ers envision grander and darker conspiracies involving everyone except Mr. Rogers and Barney the dinosaur, they say less and less about the real villain: Oswald. This is ironic, for he was eminently capable of killing a president; his violent life (he tried to kill right-wing Gen. Edwin Walker), espionage fantasies and psychiatric records amply illustrate it. Yet Posner portrays Oswald's pathetic life in such haunting detail that at times, one empathizes with him. He wanted to be somebody — a short-story writer, a translator, a Marxist-Leninist leader, a husband — yet he failed at it all. He even botched his suicide attempt.

Surprisingly, the book offers only one character who seems irredeemably evil. It's the same man whom Oliver Stone made a hero for his film "JFK": Jim Garrison. Posner shows how this corrupt, possibly deranged New Orleans district attorney conducted a homophobic witch hunt for Kennedy-killers that made Joe McCarthy seem like a model of restraint, and that destroyed a respected gay business leader, Clay Shaw. Posner quotes Garrison's theory that the assassination was "a homosexual thrill-killing." *There's a sound bite you didn't hear in "JFK."*